

Saving Our Lakes... One at a Time

By Ron Wilson

SOL Priority Waters

Armourdale Dam, Towner County
Brewer Lake, Cass County
Carbury Dam, Bottineau County
Crown Butte Dam, Morton County
Dead Colt Creek, Ransom County
Dickinson Dike, Stark County
Lake LaMoure, LaMoure County
McDowell Dam, Burleigh County
McGregor Dam, Williams County
Mooreton Pond, Richland County
North Lemmon, Adams County
Raleigh Reservoir, Grant County
Sather Dam, McLean County
Velva Sportsmens Pond, Ward County

Blacktail Dam, Williams County
Bowman-Haley Dam, Bowman County
Clausen Springs, Barnes County
Froelich Dam, Sioux County
Hoskins Lake, McIntosh County
Larimore Dam, Grand Forks County
Matejcek Dam, Walsh County
McVile Dam, Nelson County
Mount Carmel Dam, Cavalier County
Northgate Dam, Burke County
Spring Lake Ponds, Williams County
Sweet Briar Dam, Morton County
Warsing Dam, Benson County

Scott Elstad is heading an effort to save some North Dakota public fisheries that, after years of acting as catch-alls for tons of unwelcome sediment, are showing their age.

So far, about 45 waters have made the list and are in line to receive some kind of help. Those with problems worse than others are higher up the list and getting first priority.

This seemingly Herculean, but achievable rescue effort falls under the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's Save Our Lakes program. Terry Steinwand, Department fisheries chief, said that while deteriorating lake habitat has been an issue for some time, SOL is a relatively new plan in comparison.

"The future of fishing is at stake if we don't do something now to increase fish habitat," Steinwand said. "This program is extremely important."

State lawmakers approved funding for the two-year-old program, while cost-share monies are also garnered through North Dakota Department of Health and other entities, Steinwand said.

"Game and Fish and lawmakers saw the need to reduce sediment and nutrient loading into our reservoirs," said Elstad, Department aquatic habitat coordinator. "Prior to SOL, the Department didn't have a program to address these problems directly. It's a cooperative effort as we are working with landowners, water resource districts, soil conservation districts, and others around the state."

Basically, Elstad said, the problem is this: Some North Dakota waters, which literally receive tons of sediment and nutrient-rich runoff annually, are aging faster than they should.

"When the sediment goes into the water, it fills in and takes the place of valuable fish habitat," he said. "Now, for example, instead of the lake or reservoir being 15 feet deep in places, it's 8 feet, or shallower."

And in the shallower water, the growth of oxygen-eating weeds intensifies, increasing the chances of summer and winter fish kills. When lakes are lost to fish kills, anglers lose, too, as it typically takes a minimum of three years to rebuild a fishery, Steinwand said.

The problems facing some of North Dakota's waters are real.

It is estimated that Sweet Briar Dam, a popular walleye, perch and bluegill fishery in Morton County, receives from its watershed 60,000 to 90,000 tons of sediment

annually, or enough sediment to cover an acre of land in 31 feet of muck. At this rate of sedimentation, scientists figure, you could some day walk across Sweet Briar – but not fish in it – as it will be completely filled with soil in less than 60 years.

This example, of course, doesn't take into account the tons of fertilizers and pesticides applied to crops in the watershed, of which a large percentage ends up in the lake.

"We've recognized for a long time that habitat is key to good, balanced fish populations," Steinwand said. "And we also recognize that a lot of this habitat is getting eaten up."

Elstad said SOL emphasizes projects that reduce the amount of unwanted nutrients and sediments running into state waters. Projects such as:

- Sediment traps, or dry dams, built in the watershed within a mile or two of the fishery to catch sediment and nutrients before they can reach the lake.
- Stabilizing banks with rock riprap, trees, grass and other means to keep unwanted material from sloughing into the water.
- Creating exclusion areas with fences to keep livestock and farm machinery away from fragile areas along lakes and rivers.

"The success of the program depends a lot on private landowners within the watersheds of these fisheries," Elstad said. "Many of these people are environmentally friendly, and see the value in what we are trying to do."

Help with 20 or so SOL projects this summer has come from sportsmen groups, Boy Scout troops, the list goes on.

"Some of these groups are pretty ambitious and I have a tough time trying to keep up," Elstad said. "Which is a good thing, because the more involved the community is, the more we can get done."

Earlier this summer, an Ashley Boy Scout troop and lake association members planted 500 seedlings, and put up fence in an area to keep cattle out of Lake Hoskins in McIntosh County.

"We have an aging lake, and we're not going to get it back to where it was, but we're trying to preserve the way it is now," said Floyd Helfenstein, one of the Ashley Boy Scout leaders.

Helfenstein said he's a big fan of SOL and what the program is doing for state waters.

"And the kids had a blast helping out," he said. "As they watch those trees grow over the years, they can say they planted them, and helped make the lake better."

Elstad said the Lake Hoskins project is a good example of the program's ability to solve some of the water woes – one problem at a time.

"The word is getting out on the program and everyone wants their lake to be first on the list, they want you to cure their problems overnight," Elstad said. "But it's going to take time. You're not going to quickly cure 30-50 years of unnatural aging process these waters have experienced."

Twenty or so SOL projects per summer is plenty for the one-man operation, Elstad said. Plus, funding dictates what and how soon some things can get done. "We have priority waters, and if there are dollars to be spent, it goes to them first," he said.

Elstad said it's too early to see the fruits of considerable effort, as it takes time for the newly-planted trees used to help stabilize eroding banks to grow and the grasses to take root, forming thick, green mats.

"If we don't do any of this, if we didn't have the SOL program, our lakes and reservoirs in the state will continue to age faster, fishing resources will be reduced significantly, and a lot sooner than we think," he said.

The anglers of tomorrow, those little casters just now learning how to bait their own hooks, will be the beneficiaries of SOL.

"We owe it to the anglers of the future to have the same fishing opportunities we have now," Steinwand said. "The philosophy of removing the perturbations to improve the fisheries habitat has been talked about for 20 years. Now we're doing something more than talking about it."

RON WILSON is editor of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*.

Below: Some of the efforts of the Game and Fish Department's Save Our Lakes program include stabilizing banks of state waters with rock riprap, and grass and tree plantings to keep unwanted material from sloughing into the water. Inset: Sediment was removed earlier this summer along the shoreline at Velva Sportsmens Pond in Ward County to increase fishing access and curb growth of aquatic vegetation.



Scott Elstad